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FOOD CONTROL AND PRICE-FIXING IN REVOLUTIONARY FRANCE. I

When Revolutionary France was fighting all Europe a century and a quarter ago, her government was as much concerned with the cost and the distribution of the necessities of life as has been any of the warring nations since August, 1914. In the fall of 1792 it was not merely the fate of the imprisoned Louis XVI and the political consequences of victory on the Rhine and in the Netherlands that absorbed the thoughts of the Convention. One of the longest and most important debates was upon the best method of insuring a supply of bread at a reasonable price. All the more in 1793, when victory gave way to defeat and when civil strife rent the country, the food question became one of the government's chief perplexities. It was then that the members of the Convention entered upon a series of ventures in price-fixing and food control. Hardly an experiment made in Europe or in this country during the past four years but was put into effect, in a crude manner perhaps, in 1793 and 1794. The special form which these schemes took, and the measure in which they were successful, is of much historical interest.¹

¹ This essay and the one which is to follow are in substance two lectures delivered at the Lowell Institute, in Boston, in January, 1918. An adequate examination of the French experience with maximum prices has been made possible through the work

The menace of famine in France was not due in the first place to a British blockade. The war with Great Britain began in February, 1793, months after the food crisis became acute. When war was imminent the French did not appear to think of the British sea-power as a particularly dangerous factor in the situation. Charles Barbaroux, of Marseilles, was the only deputy to point it out. He asserted that a war with the Maritime Powers, England and Holland, would be the end of French importations from the Baltic, for, said he, "Kings do not know how to fight against peoples except as brigands and devastators."¹ Even in the summer of 1793, after the British ministers had definitely announced the policy of cutting off grain ships bound for France in order to reduce the French to terms by means of famine, the French politicians did not attribute high prices and the scarcity of food to the activities of the British fleet.

The Revolutionary leaders failed to appreciate the undoubted effects of the general war in upsetting the markets. They allude to the ravages of the Austrian and Prussian armies in the northern departments. They criticize the buyers of military supplies for the folly and tyranny with which they carried out their commissions. But when the deputy Philippeaux spoke of France as a besieged town, and of the people as a garrison under the most imperious

already accomplished by the Commission de Recherche et de Publication des Documents relatifs à la Vie économique de la Révolution. The most important volumes of the series published under the direction of the Commission are *Le Commerce des Céréales*, by Pierre Caron; *Les Procès-Verbaux des Comités d'Agriculture et de Commerce de la Constituante, de la Législative, et de la Convention*, 4 vols., edited by F. Gerbaux and Ch. Schmidt; *Les Subsistances en Céréales dans le District de Chaumont (Haute Marne)*, 2 vols., edited by Ch. Lorain; *Le Comité des Subsistances de Toulouse*, edited by J. Adler; *Recueil des Documents d'Ordre économique contenus dans les Registres de Délibérations des Municipalités du District d'Alençon (Orne)*, 3 vols., edited by F. Mourlot; *Documents relatifs à l'Histoire des Subsistances dans le District de Bergues (Nord)*, Vol. I, edited by G. Lefebvre. Of the last work a second volume is to appear unless its completion has been prevented by the devastation of that part of France. A study of the attempt to regulate supplies in the fall of 1792 has been made by Professor A. Mathiez in the *Revue Historique*, CXXV, 265 f., with the title "Un Essai de Réglementation pendant la Première Invasion."

¹ For the whole speech, see *Archives Parlementaires*, LIV, 670 f. All quotations from speeches given in this essay are translated from the text or version in the *Archives Parlementaires*, unless the source is otherwise indicated.

obligation to succor one another, he was thinking of the effect of the war upon property rights, rather than upon markets and prices. "The man who in such a case refuses to share his goods with his brethren," he declared, "is a traitor, and is certainly giving aid to the enemy." "This is not the hour," said he, "to exhaust the list of commonplaces upon the rights of property; the question is to save the garrison."

The problem of France was not the same as that of a great modern industrial community which does not raise enough food to supply its own markets. Like all Europe in the eighteenth century France was rural and her main business was agriculture. In ordinary years she could grow sufficient wheat to feed her own population and have some left for export. Paris was the only great city. The new machinery and the new processes of making iron and steel, which were beginning to draw the English population to the towns, had not been introduced into France. If famine threatened the French early in 1793, inability to distribute what was available somewhere within the national frontiers was the chief reason.

Adequate subsistence meant first a supply of wheat. Bread as the "staff of life" was more than a symbol; it held the most important position in the French dietary. In the southern part of the country maize was grown, but corn was considered a poor substitute for wheat. The potato was coming into favor, but was not in general use. Meat was not eaten much by the peasants. In the towns the demand was lessened by the large number of church fasts. When the people cried out for bread, it was bread that they wanted. As the crisis of 1793 developed, however, the scarcity of bread became connected with the scarcity of other foods, and also with that of necessities such as candles, soap, shoes, and clothing.

The price of bread was more sensitive to the cost of wheat than it has been in the United States, even during the year 1917. It might vary every few days, for the municipal authorities were accustomed to fix the price in proportion to the average price of wheat on each market day. If wheat went up because of rumors of crop failure, every one in the community was immediately made aware of the change.

What rendered the situation perilous was that the people of the towns, small as well as large, held among their most cherished prejudices the conviction that the grain merchant was naturally a forestaller and monopolist, and that the farmer was not much better. The name for speculators of this sort was *accapareur*, which with its provocative iteration of sharp *a*-sounds was admirably suited to the requirements of a leader in food riots. The people came honestly by their tradition in this matter. Until 1763 the government by its market rules branded the traffic in grain as something to be cautiously restricted. Purchases were to be made only in the open market, not at the farm. The farmer had to sell in person or through members of his family; he could not dispose of his grain to a commission merchant. In times of scarcity the government also forced him to keep the market supplied. Similar restrictions hampered the merchants in the purchase and carriage of grain from market to market.¹

It was against both the theory and practice of such government regulation that Turgot and other economists carried on a successful propaganda. Their opponents were not merely the popular prejudice, but a whole system of interests, from the humble attachment of market inspectors to their fees, and the reluctance of officialdom to part with powers, to the interest of the high courts of parlement in the established order and the consecrated principles. The policy of the government after 1764 depended upon the make-up of the ministry. All that was certain was that the intellectual leaders, from whom the members of the successive legislative bodies were to be drawn, were on the whole convinced followers of the economists and believed that if trade was unhampered no part of the country would suffer long from high prices.

In its method of dealing with the food supply the Old Régime had left another perilous heritage to the Revolution. The custom had grown up for local bodies, especially the provincial courts, to issue ordinances for the regulation of the trade. In times of crisis they ventured to interfere with the movement of grain from province to province. The danger was that if the authority of the central administration was shaken by revolution, each province, it

¹ G. E. Afanassiev, *Le Commerce des Céréales en France au XVIII^e Siècle*.

might be each town, would seek to protect its own food supply against its neighbors. If the local officials did not act of their own accord, mobs spurred by high prices or fear of hunger might compel action.

It was inevitable that the outbreak of the Revolution in 1789 should be accompanied by a food crisis. Riots were common. The chief concern of Bailly, the new mayor of Paris, was the purchase of grain and its safe convoy to the city. It was the lack of bread, as much as anything else, that impelled the Paris mob on October 5 to go out to Versailles and bring back to the city the "baker, the baker's wife, and the baker's boy," as the royal family was called, in evidence of the popular superstition that the government was responsible for the food supply.

By 1791 the Revolution entered upon a new stage. The party that had supported it was rent into hostile factions. An antagonism of sinister presage arose between the *bourgeoisie* and the *peuple*, made up of petty tradesmen, artisans, and the poor. Politicians of the temper of Robespierre, and journalists like Marat, seized every opportunity to set the "people" over against the "rich egoists" and "aristocrats." Henceforward "egoism" and "aristocracy," as well as forestalling and monopoly, were accusations hurled at grain merchants and farmers the moment prices were high or there was danger of scarcity. With the outbreak of war in 1792 and the overthrow of the monarchy, the reign of violent passions was undisputed. Public opinion became a stormy sea difficult for the most experienced political sailors.

People, in a panic because they do not know where next week's bread, meat, and coal are to be found, are not likely to apply the rules of evidence to every rumor. And yet it is astonishing what tales stirred the French mobs. If a few carts passed through a town at night, they certainly contained grain that was on the way to the frontier to be sold to the enemy! In eastern France was the little market town of Arc, Arc-en-Barrois, which reminds us of the Maid, Joan, for this was her country. At six o'clock on the evening of November 15, 1791, the officials heard a noise in the street, and going out saw a crowd about two wagons loaded with grain. The people declared that the wagoners were forestallers, that the

town was in need of grain, and that the wagons should not go on. The officials remonstrated, explaining that they had no right to stop loads of grain. The only consequence was that the crowd turned upon them. To save themselves from violence they retired to the Hôtel-de-ville. The communal counselor was bold enough to go out and ask the crowd to delegate six persons to confer with the magistrates. The crowd agreed, insisting that the grain should be unloaded, which the officials had to permit, because the officer of the national guard told them that his soldiers could not or would not keep order. The result of the conference was that after some words about the law and the needs of the people the magistrates asked the wagoners what they wished to do with their grain. Fortunately for the peace of Arc-en-Barrois, the wagoners said their employer had told them to sell at the first good opportunity. This was done and the riot ended.¹

The same month there was a more serious affair at Chaumont, the capital of the department. It also began with the stopping of grain wagons. After two or three days of rioting, the disturbance reached such a pitch that the administrators of the department fled from the town pursued across the fields by the mob.² In February, 1792, a terrible riot occurred in Dunkirk, the port from which grain bought in the northern departments was shipped to Bordeaux and the south. This was not the first commotion of the kind. The usual pretext was that the bills of lading marked Bordeaux were a blind and that the grain was exported. It was to prevent the ships from sailing that the riot broke out. The national guard was powerless to check it, and the soldiers of the line would not act with vigor. A proclamation of martial law did no good. After the houses of several prominent grain merchants had been sacked, the municipality ordered the grain unloaded as the only means of restoring quiet. In their fear of new disorders they appealed to the government to forbid trade by sea in grain.³

Mobs in the region of the Loire were not content with efforts to force down the prices of grain; they proclaimed schedules of prices for other necessities. At a town near Chartres they had on their list candles, beef, cloth, bar iron, and shoes. They wanted

¹ Lorain, *op. cit.*, I, 320-23.

² *Ibid.*, 140-204.

³ Lefebvre, *op. cit.*, I, 226-73.

beef at five sous, about half what it usually cost. Three members of the Convention had been sent to the region to restore order. They were seized by mobs, and under threats of instant death, compelled to authorize the list of prices. It is hardly necessary to add that the Convention did not confirm their acts; it virtually stigmatized their conduct as cowardly.¹

If the government sent grain to departments sorely in need, the towns through which it passed seized it or held it on suspicion of speculation. The inhabitants of the Alpine valleys in the south-east were treated in this fashion by Toulon, when they had nothing to live on except oats and potatoes. At Gap people were seen snatching half-baked bread from the bakers, they were so hungry. The extent of the evil appears from a report of Roland, Minister of the Interior. "If loads of wheat," said he, "have to cross several departments to reach their destination, it is rare that they are not pillaged or sold at prices fixed by the purchasers. The loads that are protected require the use of troops and all the efforts of the magistrates to remind misguided citizens of their duty."² He added that in many places the national guard had joined the people in fixing a price below the market rate.

The readiness of the people to accept every disquieting rumor about the grain trade surprised the more discerning members of the Convention. Creuzé-Latouche, the ablest advocate of the principles of Turgot and the Economists, declared that the French mind had made surprising progress during the four years of the Revolution in every matter except food supply; in that it had retrograded two centuries. "Let each of you," he continued, "recall everything rumored, denounced, or suspected about monopolies since the Revolution began. Examine each fact, with the circumstances and the persons involved, and you will see that if anything ever resembled the old popular visions of the sorcerers and spectres, it is actually these forestallings and monopolies."³ He thought that public opinion was so far astray that if a single voice utters a chance accusation of forestalling, the people are no more critical upon the question of proofs than the Judge of St. Claude was upon an

¹ *Arch. Parl.*, LIII, 597 f., 676 f., 678.

² *Ibid.*, 481.

³ *Ibid.*, LIV, 682.

accusation of sorcery. Doubtless, if he had been speaking to us, he would have referred to the presiding judge in the Salem witchcraft cases. Such a state of mind made food riots inevitable, and these threw out of gear the mechanism of the grain trade, which was the only organized method of feeding the country.

When the farmers were assailed in the Convention, Lequinio, who as one of the "Proconsuls of the Terror" could not be suspected of favoring "aristocrats," demanded of their critics, "Which of you would venture to carry your grain to market if the least that could happen to you would be to hear it screamed into your ears that you were an *accapareur*, holding back your grain to increase the public misery and to enrich yourself at the expense of the unfortunate; if you expected to see your sacks torn open and your grain either sold below market rate or taken without pay; and if you feared in the end to become the victim of popular rage stirred by mean intriguers and cheap flatterers of the people?"

The farmers held back their grain, not only because they feared being mobbed on the way to market, but because they did not wish to take the money that was offered them. This was the *assignat*, the paper money which the government had begun to issue in 1790. It was not convertible into gold, although it could be used to purchase public lands, which were better than gold, so the advocates of the issue declared. As the new tax system was badly administered, and the national revenue increasingly in arrears, while expenses grew by leaps and bounds, the temptation to call upon the printing press for cash became irresistible. When the Convention met, late in September, 1792, *assignats* to the value of 2,700 million livres had been issued. Their depreciation had been from six to ten per cent in 1790, and it was now about fifty per cent. If the farmer demanded gold or silver for his grain he was suspected of lack of patriotism or was called a speculator. As yet, to ask was not a crime. Tradesmen in the towns did not hesitate to make a difference between the price in *assignats* and the price in coin. In May, 1792, an English lady living at Amiens wrote to her friends in England, "Whenever I want to purchase anything, the vendor usually answers my question by another, and with a rueful kind of tone inquires, 'En papier, Madame?'—and the bargain concludes

with a melancholy reflection on the hardness of the times.” By January, 1793, even the copper pieces coined from the church bells were preferred to paper. “You would scarcely imagine,” she wrote, “that this copper is deemed worthy to be hoarded; yet such is the people’s aversion to the paper, and such their mistrust of the government, that not a housewife will part with one of these pieces while she has an *assignat* in her possession.” The farmer was a seller, not a buyer, and he, like the tradesman, was wont to inquire, “In paper, Sir?”¹

The government had one way and only one to make him in effect a buyer, and that was to compel him to pay his taxes. The refusal of the successive Revolutionary governments to utilize this resource is one of the mysteries of the period. Were the evidence not all the other way, we could be sure that the farmer vote was organized and that a solid block of agrarians was seated in each legislature from the Constituent to the Convention. This was not so. In 1793 and 1794 nobody in France was treated to a more select list of vituperative epithets than the farmer, and yet hardly a voice was raised in his defense in the Convention. Several members explained that the way to make him sell his wheat was to begin to collect the direct taxes; but it appeared simpler to run the printing press day and night than to undertake any thorough reorganization of the tax system. And the tax system needed to be reorganized, if the taxes were to be collected, for it rested with each commune whether it should pay or not pay. The machinery created to overcome local inertia or ill-will was too cumbersome, and thousands of communes did not take the trouble to make out their list of taxable property on time, to say nothing of making collections. Had not the farmer lost his market by reason of the disorders he would truly have been one of the spoiled children of the Revolution. He had been freed from those charges which made him, as Taine said, the “beast of burden of the Old Régime”—from feudal dues, from the tithe, and from both the taille and the vingtièmes; half the time or more he did not pay the new property taxes which the first national assembly voted. All he required to complete his well-being was a good market for his grain.

¹ *Residence in France*, by an English lady. Edited by John Gifford, I, 7-9.

High prices were also due to the competition of government agents, buyers for the army and navy, or for Paris and other towns. The government made an effort to centralize its buying, but the administrative service was so disorganized that the plan was ineffective. The agents of Paris defied control, and its 600,000 inhabitants required enormous quantities of flour. Moreover, in Paris bread was sold at a low price without regard to the cost of grain. The bakers still bought at the market, but it was the city authorities, rather than merchants, that kept the market supplied at a daily loss of 12,000 livres. As flour was for this reason cheaper than in the neighboring towns, many outside bakers found it profitable to buy in Paris. To keep the market supplied, agents were sent out who competed everywhere with other government agents. Few had an interest in keeping cost down; their object was to fill their commissions quickly. It was to the advantage of the farmer to deal with them and to avoid the chance of being plundered on the way to market.¹

In consequence of all these influences, wheat at the close of 1792 was three times as high in some markets as in others. In one department on the Loire it cost 30 per cent more than in the two adjoining departments on either side. Fifty-eight of the eighty-three departments had applied to the Ministry of the Interior for supplies. From fourteen of these Roland discovered that the military buyers had drawn large quantities of wheat and flour. They had been busy creating local famines, which he was expected to end.²

It would be hard to exaggerate the danger to France when the machinery of an industry which occupied the great body of workmen and traders in a country still agricultural was crippled. Millions of farmers, retail merchants, millers, bakers, and wholesale merchants were the pieces in the mechanism. Their habits of work were almost as rigid as the grooves and bars and ratchets of a machine. To wrench out parts, or smash the machine because something was going wrong, was a poor means of getting more of what the machine was constructed to produce. Even a government with all the prestige of national authority could not do this unless it

¹ See Roland's reports, especially *Arch. Parl.*, LII, 524; LIII, 477; LVI, 649.

² *Ibid.*, LVII, 725-26.

had another and better mechanism ready to do the work. To prepare such a mechanism was not the task of a few days. Decrees could not accomplish it. The risks were heavy. Failure did not mean merely financial loss; it meant hunger and misery to millions.

The Convention devoted many hours to the study of the problem in November and December, 1792. The question was argued upon a proposal of the Committee of Agriculture to make a careful survey of all stocks of grain and flour held by farmers, as well as by millers and merchants, to limit all buying to the open market, and to supervise strictly the purchases and sales of traders. This would be a return to the methods of the Old Régime, which Necker had tried once more in 1788 and 1789, and which then had increased the public alarm. The farmers were especially hostile to surveys of their stock of grain. Under the Old Régime this had commonly been the first step in attempts to raise their taxes. They also feared that it meant a seizure of their supply, leaving them without any reserve against a bad season, possibly without food for their families. They did not live in an age of census takers and statisticians. Every attempt to secure such inventories during the Revolution was a failure. Speaking of one, a deputy, himself a farmer, said that in a district near his home the inventory had shown that the inhabitants did not have enough grain to last until the next crop, while he personally knew that the district possessed a surplus of 60,000 bushels.¹

These measures were mild in comparison with the proposals made by a deputation from the department immediately west of Paris in which the principal towns were Versailles and Pontoise. Their remedy was to prohibit the grain trade except to millers and bakers and fix a uniform price of about a dollar a bushel. At this time wheat was selling for more, even in the departments most abundantly supplied. It is not the remedies of the petitioners, however, but their simple conception of society that is interesting. To prove that the grain trade was incompatible with the existence of the Republic, they had prepared a kind of shorter catechism. "Who compose the Republic?" they ask. There could be evidently only one reply. It is, "A small number of capitalists and

¹ Statement by Isoré, November 16, 1792. *Arch. Parl.*, LIII, 449.

a great number of poor." And the catechism goes on in the same clear, convincing style. "Who trades in grain? The small number of capitalists. Why do they trade? To become rich. How can they become rich? By raising the price of grain, in selling to the consumer." The petition adds that the same class fix wages, which results in a startling difference between the rate of wages and the price of necessities.¹ The majority of the Convention was not impressed by reasoning of this sort, and refused to give the petition the customary honor of an order to print. A deputy declared that such ideas would lead to a "code of famine."

There was no lack of violent language in the debate itself. One deputy made a bitter attack on the Economists, who, he said, were blind to the fact that the country was "swarming with enemies of liberty, the cowardly emissaries of kings now trembling on their thrones of clay." He ransacked his garret of metaphors for terms to describe men who raised prices. They were "souls of mud," "they fattened on the public misery"; "gorged with gold," and dying of surfeit, they were yet "famished for metal."

Robespierre, the "rectilinear patriot," endeavored to raise the whole question to the level of principles. It was rarely that he consented to remain below with mere facts and evidence, for these were disconcerting to the simplified logic of abstract conceptions. "The food necessary to man," he affirmed, "is sacred as life itself. Everything needed to preserve this is a property common to society. Only the surplus can be the property of individuals, and this can be abandoned to commerce. Every mercantile speculation that I make at the expense of the life of my fellow is not business, it is brigandage, it is fratricide." One is not surprised that after some minutes of this his colleagues began to jeer and called out to him to come to the point and explain what he would recommend.

The youthful Saint-Just touched one of the fundamental causes of high prices when he argued that they were due to an overissue of paper money. He expressed pity for the manufacturers and merchants whose business was gone altogether or restricted to army supplies. "I do not know what so many merchants live on," he

¹ *Arch. Parl.*, LIII, 475-76.

exclaimed. "I think I see within their homes saddened families. . . . No one complains, but how many weep in silence!" "The farmer," he added, "was accustomed each year to treasure up in coin a part of his product; now he prefers to keep his grain rather than amass paper."¹

Barbaroux thought that the war had already taken 300,000 men from the fields, with the loss in productive power equal to forty days. Another loss of forty days he attributed to the decrease in the number of cattle, mules, and horses, which had been bought for the army. His conclusion was somber. "Famine," said he, "this great destroyer of all laws and all authority, is advancing with mighty strides." Barbaroux was not a believer in violent remedies and his suggestions are interesting, especially the plan to form local associations to collect and circulate information about the crops. In other words for coercion he would substitute co-operation, believing that the French citizens, farmers and merchants included, would not turn a deaf ear to an appeal for common action against the oncoming peril.

The ablest exposition of the theory of economic liberty as the only assurance of an adequate supply was made by Creuzé-Latouche.² He showed that the measures of coercion which had been proposed were a return to practices of the ancient monarchy in its worst periods. He also showed that it was not the traders, but the lack of them, which was the cause of such startling inequalities of price in different parts of the country. The Convention yielded to these arguments and made an attempt to re-establish the grain trade. To secure its freedom the new law threatened with death those who should oppose with violence the carriage of grain from place to place. This was the last victory of the Economists. When the question came up the next time, in April, 1793, the advocates of force had the floor.

The reasons for the change lay outside the domain of argument. The center of gravity of French politics was shifting. Power had passed into the hands of the Paris radicals. The moderate deputies

¹ Saint-Just's speech is of much interest, especially because of the contrast between his line of argument and the highly abstract reasoning of Robespierre. See *Arch. Parl.*, LIII, 662-66.

² *Ibid.*, LIV, 676 f.

who had refused to vote for the death of Louis XVI were treated by the regicides as conspirators, secret advocates of a reaction and a restoration of the monarchy. Their arguments, even upon practical matters like the food question, were heard with impatience. The national peril was also greater than in December. The King's death had been the signal for war with England, Holland, and Spain. The defeat of Dumouriez in March, and his treason in April, opened the northern frontier to invasion. Violent quarrels broke out in the Convention. A Revolutionary Tribunal and a Committee of Public Safety were hastily organized. Cries of treason and demands for proscription punctuated the debates. At the same time, to meet the mounting expense of war and government, new millions of paper money were issued. Prices were rising rapidly. The food situation required attention.

The initiative came from Paris. On April 18 a petition was presented by the board of the department asking the establishment of a maximum price and the destruction of what was left of the grain trade. The severest penalties should be meted out against any farmer who either kept his grain in his barn or sold it to commission merchants instead of taking it to market. The interests of commerce were swept aside with a definition, and Robespierre was distanced by the assertion that "the fruits of the earth, like the atmosphere, belong to all men."¹ The law officer who presented the petition closed with the customary threat of an uprising in Paris. Vergniaud, the great Girondin orator, attempted to discuss the petition. At first the cries of the galleries smothered his voice, but he finally silenced his interrupters and made his point. He chose an illustration from Paris itself. "The communes which surround Paris do not produce enough for her supply, and much must be drawn from Picardy. Will the consumer go and get it? No. Will the farmer bring it to Paris? No. If you destroy commerce, you decree famine." The Convention did not venture to destroy commerce even at the dictation of Paris, but its measures had that consequence.

The occasion was urgent, but the discussion in the Committee of Agriculture and the Convention lasted two weeks and the debate

¹ *Arch. Parl.*, LXII, 621.

at times became academic in its thorough exposition of theory. One report contained 7,000 words, and Marat cried out, "You are passing your time listening to food encyclopedias." The freedom of the grain trade still had its defenders, but the number and violence of the attacking party had increased. One deputy declared that "when despots wished to famish France they had transported grain from Bordeaux to Dunkirk and from Dunkirk to Bordeaux." Another said that since the introduction of the "fatal science of the Economists" governments had been able to create a famine at pleasure. The same group attacked the farmer, especially the northern farmer, who had rented or owned large tracts of land. He was called an enemy of the Republic, and a character hard and pitiless, and with tactics so adroit that he was able to cause a continual rise in the price of grain.

The Convention finally decided, on May 4, to adopt the principle of a maximum price. The question was what should be its basis. The Paris authorities had urged a flat rate for the whole country, to hold good for a year, irrespective of local differences in the cost of production. They combined with this the forced sale of a third of each farmer's remaining supply on June 15, a second third on August 15, and the rest of the old crop on October 15. The vice-president of the department argued that if the maximum was generous enough farmers would compete with one another and make the actual price lower. Moreover the maximum price would apply only to the best grain. A few deputies felt some misgiving as to the effect of the maximum upon the value of the public lands, which was the security behind the paper money. The Convention, like other legislative bodies in times of great national emergency, was unable to harmonize its systems. It should be added, in view of the later developments of price regulation, that even the champions of a grain maximum repudiated the idea that the plan should be extended to include other necessities of life.¹

The law of May 4 was aimed principally at the farmer. It is true that all sorts of precautionary restrictions were thrown about

¹ The complete text is found in Caron, *Le Commerce des Céréales (Recueil de textes et notes)*, pp. 46-49. For discussion in the Committee of Agriculture, see *Procès-Verbaux*, III, 110 f.

the grain trade, or, rather, about what was left of it. In dealing with the farmer the plan went back to practices characteristic of the ancient bureaucracy in periods of scarcity. A rigid survey was to be made of his stock of grain, and the local authorities, from the governing board of the department down, were empowered to use all means necessary to compel him to keep the markets supplied. The Convention concluded to fix a maximum price for each department instead of a single price for the whole country. The basis was the average cost of grain on the local markets from January to May. As prices had risen during that time from twelve to thirty per cent, this meant a substantial reduction. It was the business of the department to collect the information promptly, to print tables of prices, and to send them to the communes. In order to leave the farmer no hope of a better price later in the year, the maximum was to be lowered one-tenth on June 1, one-twentieth on July 1, one-thirtieth on August 1, and one-fortieth on September 1.

This scheme, judged from the point of view of modern experience, had two bad features. The first was the failure to guarantee the farmer a reasonable profit, and so encourage him to put more acres under cultivation and raise larger crops. Should his labors slacken and his crops become small, no amount of energy in insisting upon a fair distribution of the product would keep the people from going hungry. The scheme not only failed to encourage the farmer, it threatened him with ruin. His expenses for tools, draft animals, and wages were steadily rising, but his profits were cut down, with the prospect of further losses every succeeding month.

The second blunder was the obverse of this; it was the assumption that force could be used successfully with the largest body of producing workmen the country had. The agents utilized to apply the force, when the last links in the chain of authority were reached, would be the farmers themselves, for the communal officers were either farmers or men dependent upon them.

Creuzé-Latouche told the Convention that not only farmers, but more than three-fourths of the other citizens, poor and rich alike, municipal officers, judges, indeed all public officials, would be tempted, nay compelled, to break the law. He said it was of no use to multiply penalties, to encourage delation, to establish

legions of subaltern tyrants; the chief result would be to reduce the citizens to despair. He also thought that such legislation, by throwing the country into a panic, would increase the evils which it was intended to correct. When the laws give the alarm, said he, it is not surprising that every family exaggerates its needs. To enter the farmer's barns, survey his crop, and force him to sell, would, he thought, simply lead to hoarding. The individual hoards might be small, but their total would bring about an artificial scarcity.¹

If the question be asked, Did this first scheme of a maximum price for grain work? it must be confessed that it did not have a satisfactory trial. Circumstances were against it. Before the month of May closed Paris was again in uproar. Revolutionary multitudes once more marched on the Tuileries, this time not to dethrone a king but to intimidate the deputies and to compel them to order under arrest twenty-nine of the Girondin leaders as well as the ministers of finance and foreign affairs. The Committee of Public Safety intervened feebly, was discredited, and in another month was purged of members obnoxious to the triumphant Commune and the radicals of the Mountain party. An insurrection had also taken place in Lyons, but there it was the conservatives who won, and Lyons refused to recognize the authority of a Rump Convention. Several departments also rose against the Convention, and although these partial movements were soon checked, the turmoil was fatal to efficient administration. To add to the trouble, the northern departments were invaded by the Austrians and several important towns captured.

The Convention did not create any new central machinery to enforce the law of May 4. The Minister of the Interior was responsible in such matters. Roland had resigned in January and was succeeded by Garat, who had been in the Ministry of Justice long enough to have had the unhappy duty of reading his death sentence to Louis XVI. Garat was a literary man of enough reputation to be made a senator by Napoleon. His political critics described him as the "feeble Garat." He had a weakness for fine words as a cover for dubious acts. When in June it became evident that the majority of the departments were in no haste to comply

¹ *Arch. Parl.*, LXIII, 508 f.

with the provisions of the new law, he wasted half a ministerial circular in a vapid essay on differences of climate as the "pure source" of commerce, which he described as "the sweet necessity of fraternizing for the purpose of exchanges." But, he continued, "What human conceptions are not vitiated by passion! From these vivifying speculations hideous monopoly has come forth as the fatal hemlock rises under the beneficent rays of the sun." After wooing negligent officials and reluctant farmers to obedience in such fashion, he came to the main business of the circular, that is to say, the ways in which the law had been defied and distorted.¹

The first requirement of success was prompt and uniform enforcement. The Convention had served notice on the farmers that their grain was liable to seizure at prices below what they had been getting, at least since the middle of March. Enforcement would have to hurry to gain the lead upon schemes of evasion. In such a struggle the initiative contributes greatly to ultimate victory. Here the government from the beginning was thrown on the defensive. There were exasperating delays; some departments put the law into effect, others apparently never did, some complied with the letter of the law, others added interpretations which nullified its aims. This was not from lack of patriotism. One cannot read the records of all these bodies, communal, district, and departmental, without feeling that most of the new officials were putting good-will and self-sacrifice into the work. But the problem was too big for them, and they had not acquired the habit of immediate compliance.²

The department of the Haute-Marne furnished a fair case of the perplexities of administration. According to the terms of the law the inventories were to be made within a week, the prices for the various markets from January to May averaged, and the rate for the department fixed. By the end of June very few of the communal inventories had been reported to the directory of the department. The directory was able to publish the maximum rate for the best wheat on May 31, but it was not until July 6 that a price was put upon barley, rye, and oats. The difficulty seems to have been the confusion due to the different measures used in the various

¹ Garat's various circulars will be found in Caron, pp. 49 f.

² See letter of Philippeaux, from Tours, July 17, 1793. *Arch. Parl.*, LXIX, 201.

markets. The *bichet* was the name of the measure, but in one market it contained 72 pounds, in another 75, and in still another 90.¹

The consequences of delay were sometimes interesting. The department of the Nord published its maximum prices so much later than its neighbor on the west, the Pas-de-Calais, that the farmers of the Pas-de-Calais took their grain to the markets of the Nord. The consequence was that the millers and the bakers, finding no grain in their own markets, had to go to the Nord for a supply. This aroused the suspicions of the towns along the way, and the unfortunate men were seized as forestallers and their grain and flour sold at less than they paid for it.² Reports came to the Convention that several departments had purposely delayed the enforcement of the law in order to draw grain from their neighbors and insure themselves against famine. Some had put the maximum at a rate higher than that provided by the law on the theory that high-priced bread was better than no bread at all.

The action of still other departments was even more flagrantly opposed to the common interest. They commandeered all the grain within their borders, and so made it impossible for neighboring departments or needy towns, including Paris, to buy. Districts within departments had done this, and communes within districts. If such acts were not checked France must return to the primitive conditions of the mediaeval manor. In the language of 1793 they would lead to an economic "Federalism" far more dangerous to the country than any schemes of decentralization devised by the Girondins to get rid of the dictatorship of the Paris commune. Garat tried to argue the evil out of existence by explaining in one of his circulars that the rule could work two ways, and that the departments denied grain might deny meat or other supplies and thus an embargo be laid upon every internal frontier.

The conduct of the Paris food committee still further muddled the situation. They found that the provision of the May law that grain was to be sold only in the open market interfered with the work of their purchasing agents. To remove the obstacle they procured a decree from the Convention permitting municipalities to buy directly of the farmers. They then appointed certain bakers as their purchasing agents. This brought on a violent quarrel with

¹ Lorain, *op. cit.*, I, 357, 373, 374, 379, 383-86.

² Lefebvre, *op. cit.*, I, 349.

the department immediately west of Paris, which had forbidden grain to be carried directly to outside markets, and with the town of Meaux on the Marne, which declared that all its grain was required for its own use. The Paris commissioners held Garat responsible for the troubles of their agents and launched a pamphlet against him with the title of "A Plot to Famish Paris." In the summer of 1793 and in Revolutionary Paris an attack of this kind might prove to be something more disagreeable than a journalistic sensation. Garat asked the Convention to investigate his conduct. Fortunately for him news reached the Convention that the special privileges of Paris were discrediting the law. These were revoked, and Garat exonerated.¹ An attempt was made to provide for Paris by compelling every farmer to furnish within twenty-four hours sixteen bushels of wheat for each hide of land, if the order came to him from members of the Convention deputed for the purpose.

It was at the door of the farmers that blame was laid. They were accused of forming a new aristocracy as bad as that of the feudal lords. That they were greedy was only one of their simpler vices. The deputies with the northern army accused them of being counter-revolutionaries, who held their country as a secondary interest, and even preferred Austrian gold to French paper. In August, Carnot wrote to the Committee of Public Safety that the inventories of stock in the north had been begun over three times and yet were as far as possible from revealing the true quantities. He added, "Ten hussars in twenty-four hours have produced more grain than all the requisitions in the last three months." It is common testimony that the law of May 4 caused the markets to be deserted, even if they had not been deserted before May because of fear of mob violence.

As the farmers would not voluntarily offer their grain in the markets the authorities were obliged to use the right of requisition which the law conferred upon them. At Chaumont, for example, on August 3, requisitions were sent to eight communes, in each case naming a specific amount of grain which was to be brought on the

¹ Decrees of July 1, July 5, August 25, in Caron, 51, 52, 56. For the controversy, *Arch. Parl.*, LXIX, 564; LXXII, 572. Also *Procés-Verbaux des Comités d'Agriculture*, III, 173 f. Additional information on the Paris commissioners is found in the report of Perrière, August 27, to the Minister of the Interior, in Caron, *Paris pendant la Terreur*, I. 4-11.

next market day. The municipal officers were to give orders to individual farmers for their share of the commune's quota. When market day arrived two communes had sent none and four others less than the requisitions called for. How these requisitions worked at Amiens is told by the English lady from whose letters I have already quoted. "Detachments of dragoons are obliged to scour the country," she wrote in June, "to preserve us from famine." She notes "the ludicrous figures of the farmers, who enter the town preceded by soldiers, and reposing with doleful visages on their sacks of wheat. Sometimes you see a couple of dragoons leading in triumph an old woman and an ass, who follow with lingering steps their military conductors; and the very ass seems to sympathize with his mistress on the disaster of selling her corn at a reduced price, and for paper, when she had hoped to hoard it till a counter-revolution should bring back gold and silver."¹

By this time urgent demands began to come from many quarters for the repeal of the law. Reports from the south said that the people of Cahors were so poorly fed that they were falling in the streets from sheer weakness.² The department of the Nord declared that their troubles dated from the passage of the law. "Before that time," said their memorial, "our markets were supplied, but as soon as we fixed the price of wheat and rye we saw no more of those grains. The other kinds not subject to the maximum were the only ones brought in. The deputies of the Convention ordered us to fix a maximum for all grains. We obeyed, and henceforth grain of every sort disappeared from the markets. What is the inference? This, that the establishment of a maximum brings famine in the midst of abundance. What is the remedy? Abolish the maximum." Some towns did not wait for the Convention to act; they abolished the law themselves, and by popular vote.³

The farmers had a chance to state their side of the case in July when local or primary assemblies met to vote upon the new constitution which the Convention had hastily drawn up after the revolution of May 31. These assemblies, like the similar bodies

¹ *Residence in France*, I, 279 f.

² *Arch. Parl.*, LXIX, 536, 652. See also report of Desrenaudes, an agent of Garat, Commission de Recherche, etc., *Bulletin*, 1913, 213-20.

³ Lefebvre, I, 335, 339-41, 347-48, 365, 369, etc. Mourlot, docs. 4906, 4938, etc.

in 1789, sent petitions or memorials to the Convention, not only in regard to the Constitution, but upon the maximum of May 4.¹ In the south and center disapproval of the measure was almost unanimous in town and country alike. Agricultural laborers, many of whom were paid in grain, joined in the outcry. Farmers complained that their best market was gone, since the merchants were no longer there to buy. In consequence they had little money with which to pay for the goods they needed, and yet they found that the prices of these goods had trebled and quadrupled. When they paid their laborers in money they also had to pay three times as much as usual. They accordingly asked that if the maximum was retained it be applied to all necessities of life and to wages.

In the north the sentiment was different, for that was the region of larger farms, whether rented or owned. The prosperity of the farmers excited the indignation of their *sans-culottes* neighbors, who were ready to join in any scheme to make them disgorge. In one community the citizens demanded the minute regulation of every step in the disposition of the grain crop. The only thing they failed to provide for was energy in planting and cultivating, schemes of this sort being primarily concerned with distributing the product of other people's labor. The inspectors who were to watch the farmers sell their grain or carry it to the local storehouses were to be chosen either from the officials of the town or from the poor. No man suspected of a prosperity due to his own industry should be tolerated in such a position.

It was futile to attempt to enforce the maximum of May 4. Many deputies were ready to abandon such schemes altogether, but the situation had gone beyond the possibility of negative remedies. The disturbing effects of war were ever on the increase. The other ills which a mistaken financial policy had brought upon France—loss of revenue and inflation of paper money—were also increasing. There was distress and discontent in the towns, and especially in Paris. Under the circumstances more maximum laws, rather than none at all, were the demand of the hour. And so price-fixing became one of the characteristic features of the Reign of Terror.

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¹ A. Mazaud, *Les Révendications économiques des Assemblées primaires en Juillet, 1793*, chap. iii.